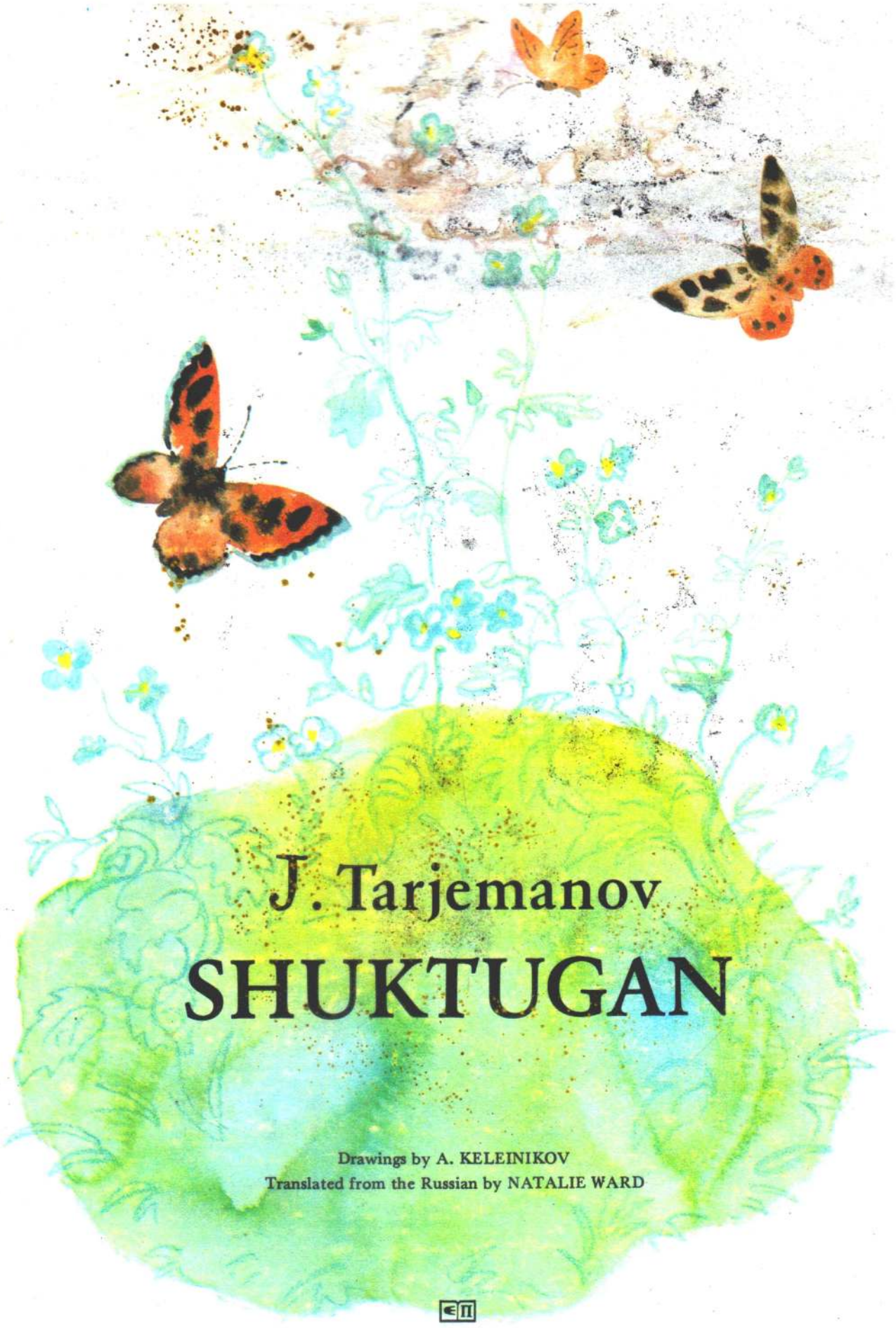
J. Tarjemanov

# SHUKTUGAN



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# SHUKTUGAN

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Translated from the Russian by NATALIE WARD

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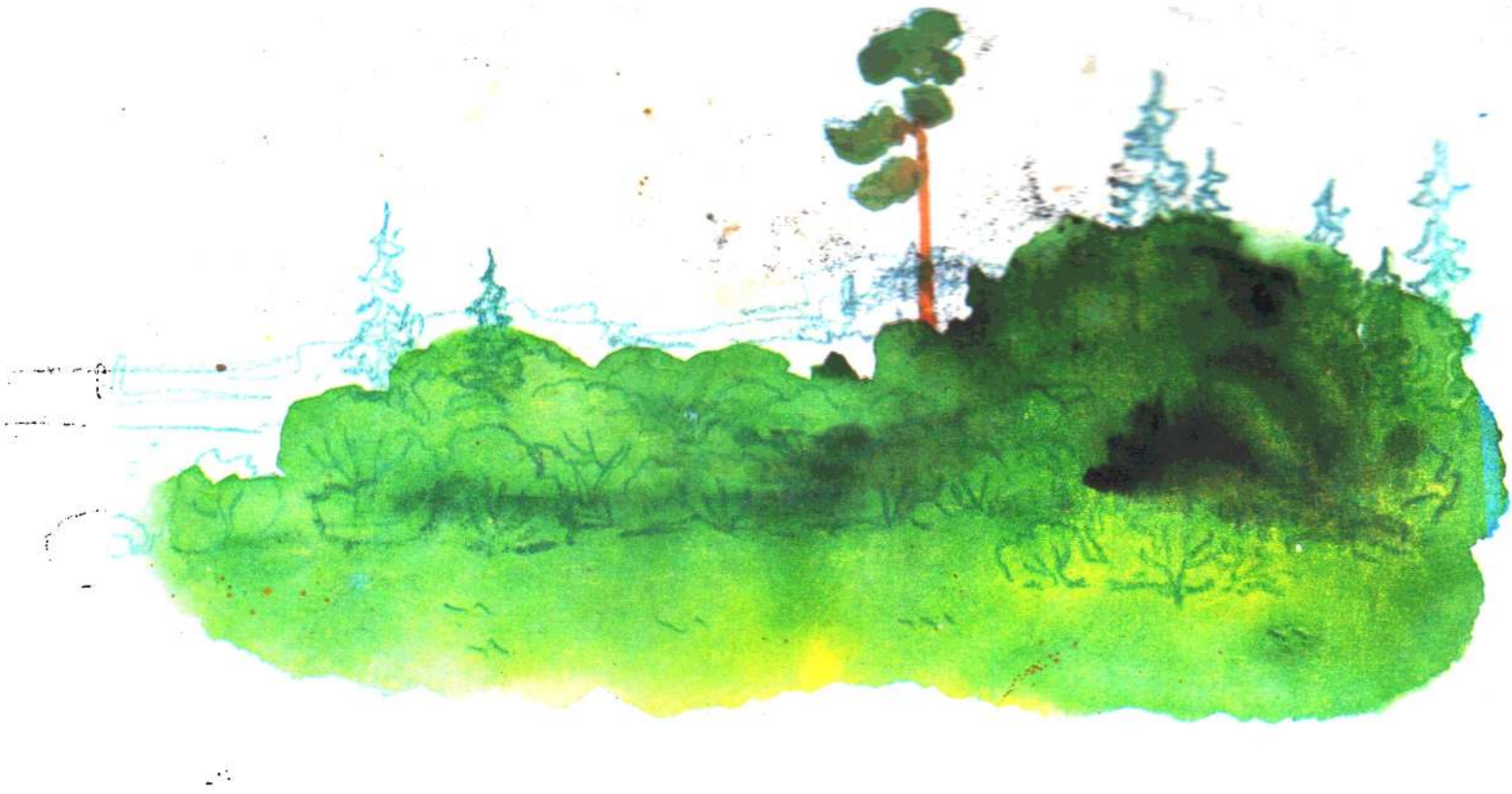


Up rose the sun, warming the earth. The flowers of the forest clearings came up blue, yellow and pink. A busy little bee fussed and buzzed around them, while the butterflies turned somersaults in the clear air.

The squirrel started anew her task of gathering nuts, hopping from branch to branch. The fox lay in wait for a hare behind a bush. In among the raspberries a clumsy old bear was stuffing himself with berries.

Old Tuk-Tuk-Babai woke up on his perch in a tall pine-tree by the lake. Tuk-Tuk-Babai was a woodpecker with a sharp, heavy beak, and he had built his nest in a hollow of this old pine. This was his home, both winter and summer.

Tuk-Tuk-Babai's job was to look after the health of the trees in the forest. He tapped away at their bark, pecking out the bark-

eating beetles and collecting up the caterpillars.

Tuk-Tuk-Babai's little grandson, Shuktugan, lived there with him too.

Each morning Tuk-Tuk-Babai set to work as soon as the sun was up and the bat had gone home to bed. He went carefully over the trees, tapping to see whether they were healthy and free from wood- and bark-beetles.

Old Tuk-Tuk-Babai worked right through till evening, while his grandson Shuktugan played all day, hopping from branch to branch, chasing butterflies and frightening lizards. When he got too hot, he went for a dip in the lake.

And when he got tired or hungry, he would fly home to the old pine-tree. Dinner was always waiting for him, for Tuk-Tuk-Babai used to bring home berries and fat caterpillars in his beak.

There came a day when Tuk-Tuk-Babai flew home from the woods in a state of agitation and grief.

"Things are looking bad, old son. A great host of beetles and caterpillars has invaded the woods and there are too many of them for me to deal with it by myself. Come and join me, or the woods will perish."

"What do you mean, Grandfather?" asked Shuktugan in surprise. "How can those little beetles kill off a whole forest?"

But he didn't stop to argue with his grandfather and set off with him to save the lives of the limes and birches.

They chose an old lime to start with. Shuktugan made himself comfortable, wedged his tail against the trunk and started to knock at an old branch, setting pieces of bark flying.

Tuk-Tuk-Babai was full of praise:

"That's it, Shuktugan! There's a good boy!"

But Shuktugan very soon tired of the work, and started to complain:

"I'm tired out, I can't go on any longer! My beak hurts, my neck aches ... let me go off for a swim!"

"All right, then," nodded Tuk-Tuk-Babai, "fly off to the lake and have a dip. But come back quickly. We must deal with these beetles by evening."

Shuktugan, delighted, took off from his branch and forgetting how tired he was set off to chase butterflies.

And he played for so long that in the end he really did wear himself out. Then he felt hungry, so flew home to their own clearing, where he found some berries and gobbled them up. And after that he had a swim in the lake, went back to the nest in the hollow and fell fast asleep.

Old Tuk-Tuk-Babai woke him up.

"Dear oh dear, old son, why didn't you come back? I worked all day alone, and wasn't able to deal with those beetles. Come on, let's get back to work before it gets quite dark."

"Back to bark-tapping..." whimpered Shuktugan. "I'd rather go and ask the bat to teach me to catcn beetles on the wing. When morning comes, you'll see how many I've caught."

And so he flew off to the old ruin where the bat lived, hid behind a bush and waited.

At last night fell, the glow-worms lit up and the owl came out hunting. The bat flew noiselessly out over the forest clearings. Shuktugan saw how fast she caught may bugs, without once hitting a tree in the darkness, and so he flew up to her and said:

"Teach me to catch beetles in the dark as quickly as you do!"

"I'll try," said the bat, "only your long beak is the wrong shape. You'd do better looking for beetles in the bark. And besides, you haven't got ears like mine."

"But why do you need those big ears?" asked Shuktugan.

"What do you mean, why?" said the bat. "I fly above the trees and give out a shrill whistle which goes out into the darkness.

If it meets an object, a beetle or a tree, I feel it at once with my sensitive ears. If it's a beetle, I catch it. And if it's a tree or a branch, I change course."

"Well, well," thought Shuktugan. "I'll try that too."

He flew up above the trees, let out a squeak and listened for the echo. Silence. And then he hit the top of a fir-tree in the darkness and fell.

When it got light, Shuktugan flew home, hungry.

As he flew above the trees, he saw a toad sitting motionless under a burdock in the ditch. There was an ant crawling past. The

toad flicked out her tongue, swallowed the ant and then froze again. Then by came a slug, out flicked the tongue again and the slug went the same way. The toad swallowed it and sat waiting for the next victim.

"I'll have a go at that, too," thought Shuktugan.

He saw a snail on a toadstool, and tried to catch it with his tongue. But he wasn't fast enough; the snail hid in its shell and he couldn't get it out, however hard he tried.

He asked the toad how she managed to catch ants and slugs so fast.

"I can do it," she said, "because my tongue is so quick and so long and sticky, unlike yours. The ants and snails just haven't time to hide."

And so Shuktugan flew on, hungry as ever.

Then he saw a woodcock, walking along the edge of a bog. The woodcock would shove his long beak into the ground, listen a moment, and then pull out a fat worm or a maggot.

"Mine is a long beak, too," thought Shuktugan. "I could do that just as well."

So Shuktugan landed near the woodcock and shoved his beak into the ground, but found nothing. All he did was give himself a dirty beak.

"Listen, Woodcock," said Shuktugan, "tell me how you find the worms and maggots. I've got a long beak too, but I couldn't catch anything."

"Aha," said the woodcock, "I can hear through my beak where the worms and maggots are mov-

ing under the earth. But you can't, can you?"

"He's right," thought Shuktugan, "I can't catch worms and maggots underground. I haven't got the kind of beak the woodcock has, to be able to hear where the worms are under the earth. And I can't catch may bugs on the wing, like the bat. And I can't shoot with my tongue, like the toad. So I'd better go back to tapping the trees and getting the beetles and maggots out from under the bark, or else I'll stay hungry."

And at that Shuktugan flew home.

He was approaching his own pine-tree and their lake, but there was something strange about the trees all around. The leaves had gone yellow and curled up, and the birches had lost theirs completely. There were no birds to be heard, and not a leaf on the bushes. There was nowhere for even a hare to hide.

The forest was absolutely silent. The only sound was of dead, dry leaves falling onto the ground.

Shuktugan started to shout for his grandfather, but there was no answer. The only creature that heard his shouts was the hedgehog.

"Hey, what are you shouting about?" he asked.

"Where's my grandfather? Where have all the animals gone?"

"Bore-beetles and caterpillars attacked our woods, and ate all the leaves, so the animals had to leave: there was nothing left for them to eat, and nowhere to hide. And your grandfather has flown off to call the birds to come and fight the beetles and caterpillars. And where have you been, Shuktugan, why weren't you helping them?"

Shuktugan didn't answer, but flew silently off home.

As he reached their pine-tree, he suddenly caught sight of Tuk-Tuk-Babai at the head of a great flock of birds of all kinds, tits, chiff-chaffs, nuthatches, and fly-catchers.

And suddenly the forest came to life. The woodpeckers started tapping the bark and digging out the maggots and beetles. When they had finished the tits flew squeaking in to check that there were no bark-eating beetles hiding anywhere that might have been overlooked. The nuthatches climbed all over the trees upside-down, pulling bore-beetles out of the deepest cracks. The chiff-chaffs and fly-catchers flew about, picking caterpillars off the branches and leaves.

Tuk-Tuk-Babai caught sight of Shuktugan and shouted:

"Come here, and help to save the woods!"

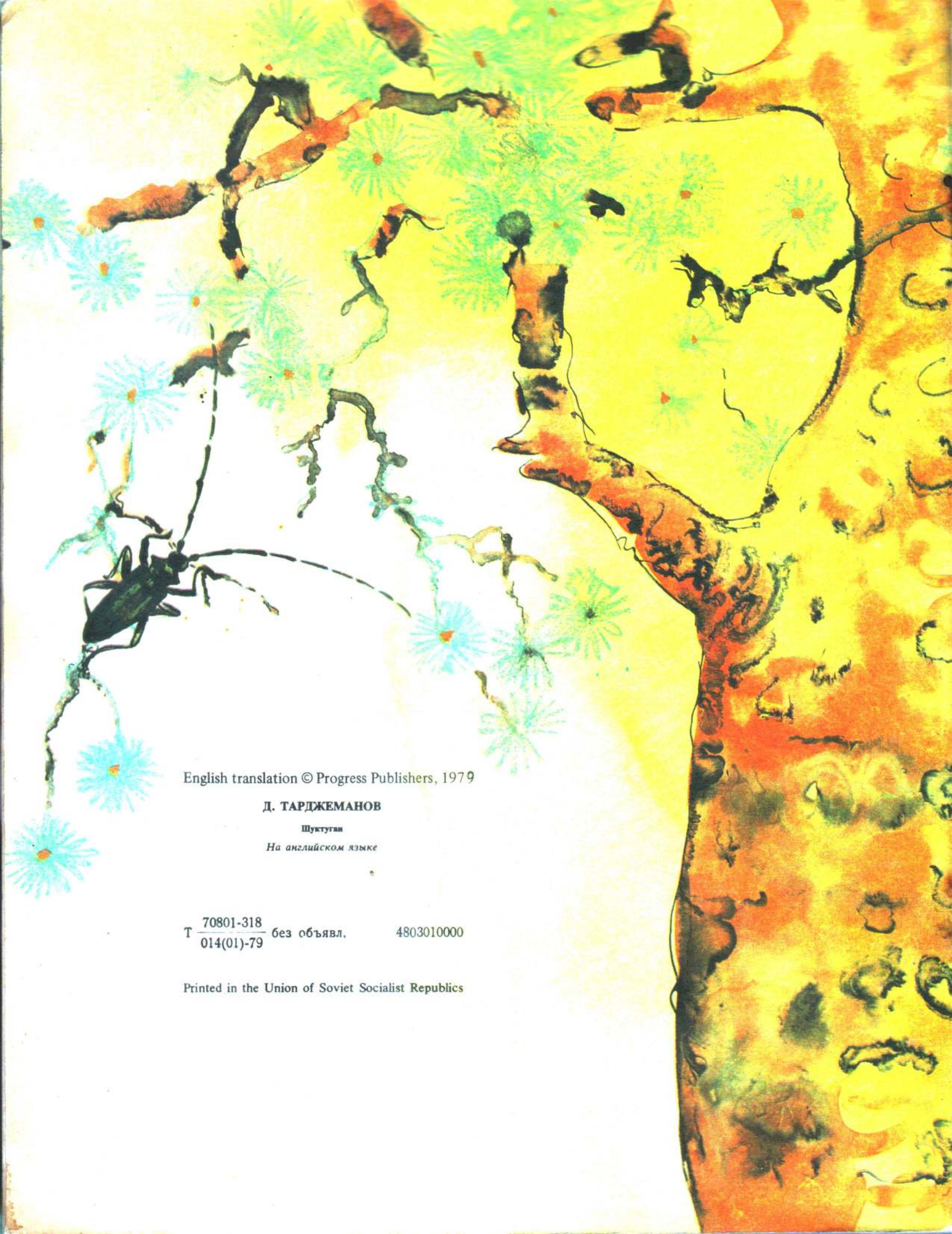
Shuktugan flew up and landed next to Tuk-Tuk-Babai on the branch where he was sitting. He braced his tail against the tree and started to tap the bark with his beak. He pulled out one bark-eating beetle and ate it, and it was so good that he immediately pulled out another and ate that as well.

The birds worked all day long. But by evening there was not a single harmful beetle or gready caterpillar left in the forest.

And in the morning the birches came back to life, and the wind returned to their green foliage. The butterflies flew back to the flowers, and the hares came back to play and turn somersaults in the clearings.

The mother-bear brought her cubs to the lake to bathe, and the hedgehog used his prickles to bring home a big mushroom for his babies' breakfast.

"Well," said Tuk-Tuk-Babai to Shuktugan, "now you're quite grown up. You've learned for yourself how to get food and heal the trees. From now on we'll seek out pests and look after the forest together."



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**Д. ТАРДЖЕМАНОВ**

**Шуктуган**

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